

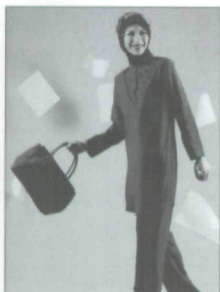
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# Fashion and Faith in Urban Indonesia

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## **Abstract**

In the past fifteen years, urban Indonesian women have increasingly chosen to adopt a form of Islamic dress called *busana Muslim*. This shift could be read as an index of two apparently contradictory or mutually exclusive phenomena, a rise in Islamic piety and a rise in consumerism. This article suggests that rather than reducing the popularity of Islamic fashion in contemporary Indonesia to either religion or consumerism, the rise of Islamic fashion should be understood within a context of national debates about modernity and piety. Through a consideration of Islamic fashion as commodity fetish, I argue that the commodification

of Islamic dress in urban Indonesia has not been a straightforward process, but rather is an arena for Indonesian Muslims to think about the relationship among faith, gender, and materiality.

**KEYWORDS:** materiality, Islam, piety, commodity fetish, gender

Dear *Noor* magazine,

I am a 27-year-old single woman who wears Muslim clothing ... I work as a marketing consultant in Jakarta. My job requires that I be mobile and meet with clients from major corporations ... Can you please advise me on clothing that would suit my figure, is appropriately formal yet approachable and, most importantly, will look chic and young?—Irma

Dear Irma,

To dress in a chic way, you should choose work clothes that are feminine but simple. Use fabric that isn't stiff, and use flowing, flattering fabric in bright colors like light blue, peach or light brown. To really complete your look, choose a headscarf that has a nuance or detail that is almost the same as your blouse and skirt. Good luck trying this out, Mbak Irma, and may your outfits be chic.—*Noor* magazine, June 3 2005

In the last decade in urban Indonesia, women's fashions have been influenced by explicitly Islamic forms of dress that are variously called *busana Muslimah* or *Islami*. Versions of long-sleeved and floor-length garments, and loose or fitted head coverings, have become so common as to indicate a trendy transformation of a subgenre of dress and personal appearance that, until the early 1980s in Indonesia, was so unusual as to seem rare and foreign. This proliferation of Islamic dress, and associated Islamic material culture in urban Indonesia, is the result of an intersection of political, economic, and cultural changes that are tempting to read as evidence of a religious radicalism among the urban middle classes in Indonesia, and of fewer social freedoms for Indonesian women. Yet as scholars of Indonesia have argued (Brenner 1996; Smith-Hefner forthcoming; Widodo 2004), the popular rise of Islamic dress should be understood within a context of debates about modernity and piety, debates that have not exclusively resulted in the kinds of dire results such interpretations might suggest, but that have nonetheless stimulated commodified forms of religious appearance. In this article, I will build on this argument to propose that the commodification of Islamic dress in urban Indonesia has not been a straightforward process, but rather has been and remains an arena for Indonesian Muslims, men and women alike, to think about the relationship among religion, gender, and economics.

To make this argument, I will revisit Karl Marx's concept of the commodity fetish to explore the ways piety and commodification might be neither mutually exclusive nor totalizing. The concept of the commodity fetish is frequently used to analyze forms of material culture that circulate in capitalist social systems, and is perhaps especially suitable for considering commodities that are associated with religious piety because Marx perceived the mystification of consumers to be a nearly spiritual effect of capitalism. Yet this perspective has also been critiqued for its inability to account for forms of agency and meaning that not only survive commodification but are produced and pleasurable precisely because of the circuits of consumption and production upon which capitalist exchange relies. In considering religiously identified commodities in particular, the commodity fetish argument risks ignoring the personal and genuine priorities individuals, positioned and performing as consumers, feel they hold: the cultivation of a relationship with God through the consumption of goods sanctified as pious. Before turning to my argument about the fetish, however, I will trace the changes I describe above through situating the status work of Islamic fashions in the context of the cultural politics of the middle classes in contemporary Indonesia. I will make two distinct but related points through these cases. First, I will suggest that among middle-class young women in urban Java, and in Indonesia more broadly, expressions of Islamic piety have moved from explicitly *anti-fashion* frugal and moral critiques of an older generation to more commodified and explicitly *fashionable* expressions, making the public practice and performance of piety far more visible and common in Indonesian cities than in the past. Second, I am interested in how these cases can advance our theorizing of fashion consumption. How can we interpret the ways that pious fashion and commodification overlap without diminishing the piety individuals feel in consuming fashion?

### **Historical Roots of Indonesian Islamic Fashions**

The proliferation of Islamic fashions is visible across multiple sites in Indonesia, from shopping malls and television shows to university campuses and elementary schools. And like the mix of venues in which such dress is worn, Islamic styles are likewise diverse, ranging from *cadar*, the nearly black, Saudi-associated styles with face coverings, to very colorful, patterned, and often fitted styles less frequently associated with foreign origins, which might involve modest Western style business-wear with a fitted headscarf called a *jilbab*. *Busana Muslim* is a general term encompassing this range of expressions but is most typically associated with a loose ensemble comprised of a long skirt or flowing pants, a loose-fitting long-sleeved tunic, and a head covering of some style. The Islamic fashion scene now spans a wide spectrum of

styles, outlets, and sites of expertise, some of which emphasize global connections to alternative centers of international taste such as Cairo or Jeddah, suggesting that the Paris–New York hegemony of fashion faces new competition. As fashion, tunic styles, detailing, or types of head covering have increasingly shorter half-lives, replaced after a few months with the next new preference in color or cut (see Figure 1).<sup>1</sup> New department stores specialize in Islamic fashions and heavily advertised women's magazines such as *Noor* and *Ummi* address readers as a market segment or demographic that shares an interest in living Islamic lives, providing evidence of what critics both in and outside of Indonesia suggests is the transformation of a religious identity into mere lifestyle.

In this article, I focus on two sites where debates and representations about Islamic fashions have occurred in the past decade: the burgeoning and lively field of women's fashion and advice magazines in Indonesia, and the arena of small self-help schools designed to inculcate business and social skills. Both fields have served as important locations for a rather self-conscious education of modernity and femininity in Indonesia that emerged under the didactic rule of the Soeharto regime but has also remained during the creation of a more neo-liberal form of government in the years since the regime fell.<sup>2</sup>

The cultivation of an indigenous Indonesian fashion industry, which celebrates neo-traditional styles as well as Western-style clothing, has been a key element of national development strategy in Indonesia, development that has been figured as not only economic but also cultural. National elites have considered fashion, or "*fesyen*" as it is called in Indonesian, to be one component of national cultural growth. Indonesian designers who have trained in Europe and the United States have local celebrity status within Indonesia, fashion shows are covered in close detail in women's magazines, and women who cannot afford their designs still know and track collections. It is possible that this kind of consumer awareness is a continued effect of the colonial concern with using dress as a marker of difference. As scholars of colonial history and fashion alike have argued, dress practices were central to colonial rule and to postcolonial anxiety (Craik 1994; Tarlo 1996; Niessen 2003). Patricia Spyer has argued that during the nineteenth century Dutch colonizers in the Aru Islands of the East Indies used knowledge of fashion, both through its production and consumption, to negotiate rule there. While Dutch traders collected luxury items for the European fashion market (feathers and pearls for French designs in particular, the value of which the island's producers were deemed to be unschooled), they simultaneously mocked islanders' use of European-style clothes as instances of failed mimicry. "[L]ike history and time, fashion belonged to colonizers and not the colonized" (Spyer 1998: 169). Clothing in general, and fashionable clothing in particular, thus constituted one set of boundaries policed under colonial rule, boundaries that nationalists

**Figure 1**

A 2000 runway show in Jakarta, showcasing a *busana Muslim* collection by designer Ari Hasni inspired by Central Javanese batik patterns. Photograph courtesy of *Femina* magazine.



picked up and emphasized as much as those colonizing them did. As Rudolf Mrazek has argued, tensions about boundaries within households and in public life at the turn of the twentieth century in the Indies focused on clothing (2002: 131). Considering that social classification appeared to be based on deep moral and biological differences, how might clothing not simply express those differences, but produce them, enact them, make them material? By the 1930s, Indies revolutionaries

were invested in the power of clothing for playful performance but also to reproduce boundaries between "us" and "them" that were central to nationalist fervor (Mrazek 2002: 154). In this sense, clothing was a technology, attractive for its material ability to signify and generate nationalism.<sup>3</sup>

Without extending the colonial debates too far into the future, it is safe to say that cloth and dress remain characters on the national stage for contemporary Indonesians, although this has generated a relatively fixed array of uniforms for different contexts, especially for men. Women's dress has therefore increasingly become the terrain for debates about morality and nation (cf. Jones 2003). For contemporary elites in Indonesia, an important attribute of being a world-class country and arriving on a global stage has involved having local fashion. For Jakarta tastemakers and designers, attractive local fashion has meant not simply pride in and use of neo-traditional women's clothes, although that is important, but also the knowledge and enjoyment of clothes that are appropriate to white-collar work (as opposed to manual labor or factory work). Showing that one could locate knowledge about local fashions' position in a global chronology of fashion references, revealing the ebbing and waning of trends specific to an Indonesian cultural context, all while maintaining cultural authenticity, have been as important to producing developed citizens as other sectors of national development. Only recently, however, has a significant portion of the national fashion scene focused on Islamic styles. Before the mid-1990s, Islamic dress was limited to small specialty shops and tailors, although producers and consumers nonetheless saw themselves as tasteful and current.

In this sense, the formation of subject-citizens has been importantly located not only in official or state arenas of development, but has been mediated by the mass media and market-based sites of modernity, thereby linking consumption to citizenship. Women's magazines, television programs designed for women viewers, and private femininity courses during the Soeharto regime, which lasted from 1965 to 1998, took on the ideological and one could argue, political, labor of the state in managing the domestic sphere, encouraging women to be full-time housewives and reinventing courtly traditional styles as authentic. This time also marked a period of significant economic growth. The state's willingness to discipline oppositional factions, including political Islam, often stopped at its ability or will to discipline foreign capital, which manifested in tremendous visible economic change in the late 1980s and 1990s. Considerable foreign investment generated a building boom and urban transformation, most visibly apparent in the skyline of cranes and skyscrapers, as well as gleaming malls. During this period, discourses about social difference in urban Indonesia often did not directly include close attention to social and economic inequality, and instead often took the form of conversations about status, lifestyle, or increasingly, religious piety.

It was in the face of both New Order political restrictions and the proliferation of consumer thrill that an Islamic critique of the moral order of things became appealing. Robert Hefner has argued that a powerful strategy of the Soeharto regime involved suppressing political dissent, particularly through quashing political parties and student organizing, leaving religious organizations and identities as primary sites for critique of the *status quo*, usually on moral grounds (2000). Islamic associations thus came to have important political and public power in steering debates about Indonesian politics, which the Soeharto regime had to negotiate through what one might call a selective Islamification of the state. Examples of this change included attempts at co-opting Islamic associations into government agendas and public expressions of piety by the Soeharto family, even as those very family members were widely known to have used their privileged positions to acquire enormous wealth.

During the 1980s and 1990s, this political context partly influenced a visible rise in explicitly Islamic identities among young people, visibly displayed by young women who chose to adopt new forms of dress often glossed as "veiling." As Suzanne Brenner argued, these forms of dress were less about dress per se than about adopting forms of self-discipline, in this case religious forms, which felt explicitly modernist and generational (1996). For example, the increasingly common use of the *jilbab* head covering was in no way a return to a previous "tradition," for the *jilbab* had never been common in Indonesia. Historically, the only women for whom headscarves were typical were older women who had completed the *hajj*, and they wore a gauzy, loose *kerudung* rather than the more opaque and close-fitting *jilbab*. Brenner suggests that for young people in the 1980s and early 1990s, Islam's appeal was importantly about critiquing a corrupt, feudal, parental order that had failed to deliver on its economic promises. Instead, a better vision would offer an alternative, global imagined community, one in which individual faith could transform national life. Many young people described these identities as a personal project, often as new converts to a religion in which they had been raised and as counter to their parents' preferences (see Figure 2). Indeed, to the older generation, such as the parents of young converts, their children's endorsement of a version of Islam that felt more foreign than local was also easily critiqued as variously imitative, inauthentic, or simply uppity.

For many of the young women and group leaders of this period, Islamic piety was explicitly anti-consumer and pointedly directed at older generations of men and women whom they considered lax in their devotion, evidenced in part through their excessive relationship to consumer goods. This, in spite of the fact that *busana Muslim*, *jilbabs*, and other accessories of Islamic piety were rapidly commodified during this period, even from the outset of this movement.

**Figure 2**

Young women in the slightly more severe style of *busana Muslim* associated with youth cultural critique of the 1990s. Photograph and copyright Mark Lewis.



### Fabric and Fetish

The increased visibility of Islamic dress in Indonesian urban life, and the various debates about its prevalence, calls to mind Karl Marx's critique of the commodity form and capitalist production. Marx's description of the commodity as a fetish can describe the phenomena I have described. Indeed, as Amrih Widodo has argued, the concept of fetish is perhaps the best-suited analytical lens through which to interpret the rise in Islamic consumer goods in Indonesia, for the fetish concept frames objects as having both economic and religious value (2004). As fashion, *busana Muslim* has clearly become commodified in that it is increasingly available from corporate retail outlets, embedded in formalized circuits of production, circulation, and exchange, and subject to rapid shifts in styles. Much of the appeal of these fashions comes from the sort of personal and social transformation that the consumer might believe will follow from the purchase and donning of the garments. In that sense, *busana Muslim* is fetishized.<sup>4</sup> It conceals unequal social relations of production and the abstraction of labor into a concrete form, the material object of the Islamic outfit that then animates compelling new social relations on behalf of the consumer. It seems to speak on behalf of the wearer, declaring "I am pious and fashionable," yet also deflects attention from the social relations that produced it in favor of promised new social relations that the consumer finds appealing, and which may in fact accrue to her or him. Yet the fact that commodities can simultaneously absorb both economic and religious values, even contradictory values, is significant. Indeed, as Bill Maurer has argued in analyzing Islamic banking practices, the processes whereby profits and



private property are rendered respectable reveal significant investment designed to not simply purify capital exchange, but also to keep certain social relations primary and visible (2005).

If piety was the only expression such fashions seemed to “say,” then the lens of the commodity fetish might sufficiently describe the recent transformation of Islamic dress in Indonesia from occasional religious declaration to mainstream fashion statement. Yet it is precisely because the commodity form is open-ended, its meaning and social value never fully determined, that consuming the commodity is pleasurable. Indeed, Marx argued that at the heart of the commodity lies a magical gap between the material properties of its use value and the affective dimensions of its fetishization, dimensions which give rise to exchange value (1976: 319–22). That gap prevents a permanently closed relationship from settling between a commodity and the meaning, pride, thrill, and risk that comes with consuming it. A commodity can, and often does, both fail to meet what it promises and exceed that promise, especially after the moment of exchange and after it enters into social situations. In fact, the marketing and advertising industries of late capitalism labor intensely to manage that gap, to close it as tightly as possible, even as they rely on it to incite consumption.<sup>5</sup> As David Graeber has argued, fetishes properly understood can be agents of social creativity and generate new forms of social relations (2005). Indeed, it was the possibility of changing national social conditions through altering the signs on women’s bodies that in part motivated the young women and men Brenner studied.

Yet what such fashions may connote differs according to historical context, subject position, observer, and social class, even within a single country.<sup>6</sup> As several scholars have persuasively argued (Abu-Lughod 1995, 2002; Deeb 2006; El-Guindi 1999; Mahmood 2005), for Western liberal feminists and interested public officials, the veil has become problematically synonymous with women’s domination. Such work shows how reducing Islamic identity to the sign of the veil, while ignoring other forms of religious and political action, and neglecting the social contexts in which veiling may be as liberating as limiting, reproduces the blind spots of the commodity fetish, imputing more agency to the thing than to wearers or other social factors.<sup>7</sup> Even scholars who agree that the veil can have multiple political, social, and personal meanings may be concerned about the commodification of Islamic dress, hinting that the political potential of Islamic identities is diluted when such dress becomes fashionable and trendy (Ismail 2004; cf. MacLeod 1992).

Such concerns find unlikely echoes in current anxieties in Indonesia, critiques expressed by a range of actors from Islamic elites both conservative and liberal, to generational and nationalist voices, anxious about the commodification of *busana Muslim*. In those critiques, consumers of fashionable *busana Muslim* are positioned as starry-eyed slaves to fashion, either imitating piety or deluded into thinking that

the clothes themselves might produce piety. Yet none of these critiques addresses how women might borrow from the authority of a discourse of consumer choice or of Islam to position themselves as in control of their choices. And both critiques assume that individual agency is total, either completely absent or completely present, rather than itself a constructed effect of these debates. By contrast, women I knew readily insisted that they could not assume that merely donning *busana Muslim* would create the changes they desired in themselves, or others. Rather, much as Brenner argued for women in the early 1990s, women felt that the decision was exciting, involved considerable effort as an act of personal transformation, and frankly should not be open to others for critique. *Busana Muslim* was, in their perspective, a result of a prior decision to cultivate a pious lifestyle, not something that generated the changes automatically, and that no one but God could fully know a woman's intentions or heart. For these women, it was reasonable, then, to consider the reward and promise of a devout lifestyle as consistent with the thrill of selecting attractive clothing. In what follows, I will analyze several cases of debates over the meaning of *busana Muslim* in Indonesia. As Webb Keane argues, clothing is about much more than "just the expression of 'identities'" (2005: 192). These examples will demonstrate how clothing actively mediates the relationship among materiality, commodification, and gender.

### **What Can Material Mean?**

Mbak Carla, you know, I really feel different in *busana Muslim*. I think I should wear it now, even though I am only 28 and I always thought I wouldn't wear it until I was much older, because it makes me behave differently. I want to go on the *haji* someday, and I need to work on becoming closer to God before I can go, and when I wear *baju Muslim* I cannot forget God ... Besides, these clothes are more flattering on me since I have become a mother. And my husband is reminded that I am a good wife when he looks at me! He can't forget that I am moral.

Ibu Tia shared this with me on a hot afternoon in Yogyakarta in 1998 after I expressed surprise at seeing her twirling around her cramped living quarters in *busana Muslim* for the first time. In over a year of thrice-weekly conversations, I had had no idea that she was considering adopting *busana Muslim* and on that day we immediately fell into a conversation about whether the lace on her *kerudung* was too matronly and whether the shade of peach in her blouse was right for her skin tone. Tia's comments suggested that her adoption of Islamic dress, a change that ultimately was gradual and only completed over several months (in part because of the substantial expense entailed in a radical

wardrobe change), was embedded in a web of influences, including interest in maintaining her husband's respect for her, her individual desire to become more devout, and concern about her changing figure. During our months of friendship, I had come to recognize the power Tia invested in some commodities in her life. Unbeknownst to her husband, she was quietly saving money in order to renovate their kitchen into the style modeled on television soap operas, because she admired the kind of ideal family dynamic portrayed on those shows. In addition, she was delighted that her infant son's favorite toy was a plastic cell phone, as she hoped that it would instill in him an interest in activities that would later benefit him as a businessman. In each of these examples, objects had the potential to create a different social world. Yet Tia also acknowledged that the potential was always only partial, and that in order for each to become realized, she would have to invest effort and intention for them to come to fruition. She insisted that her change of dress styles was primarily motivated by her desire to perfect her individual relationship with God, which was something that no one else could assess or know, and that improving her relationship with God would benefit all those around her, especially her son. She had increased her private Koranic study well before her change in wardrobe, yet found that her wardrobe change had itself motivated further study.<sup>8</sup>

By the late 1990s and the end of the Soeharto regime, the landscape of Islamic fashions had altered significantly from its youth-associated and critical roots of the 1980s. Rather than seeming a biting social critique, or feeling foreign, *busana Muslim* had come to feel more like an unsurprising consumer choice among an array of dress styles for young women. Islamic styles were promoted in specialty magazines and shops. The cosmopolitan cachet of an alternative fashion system tied to a proud, ascendant global *ummah* added to its allure. Nancy Smith-Hefner has found that from fewer than 3% of middle-class female university students who chose to wear *jilbabs* on the Gadjah Mada University campus in the late 1970s, now over 60% do (Smith-Hefner forthcoming). Johan Lindquist has argued that among working-class migrants to the island of Batam, an Indonesian island bordering Singapore and the site of considerable offshore production, adoption of Islamic piety, partly through dress but also through other forms of devotion, has mitigated the sense of failure and degeneracy that marks the island. Movement through public space on the island has become a far more dangerous undertaking than in most other Indonesian cities. For young women who feel their journey to a distant location in pursuit of economic and personal advancement has not succeeded, vigilant attention to their religious purity can be comforting, especially if it protects them from accusations of immorality or sex work (2004). As a result, Batam has one of the highest percentages of women who wear *jilbabs* in the country.

However, women who don such clothing yet who are judged to not take the garments' assumed essence seriously can come in for critique. Both Smith-Hefner and Lindquist show that while the adoption of *jilbabs* may make a woman feel some pride in her modern and stylish identity, or feel safe in a morally fraught and violent environment, its meanings are by no means fixed but rather are importantly dependent upon those who don and observe the garments in use. Both working and middle-class women who choose forms of Islamic dress are scrutinized for their choices and may be held to account by strangers for their public declaration of an Islamic identity. Any behavior contrary to the particular message the garments are thought to make can be policed. Batam women in *jilbabs* can be accused of using *jilbabs* strategically to conceal their true identities as prostitutes, while those who seek gynecological advice may be refused care on the grounds that pious women have no legitimate need for services only necessary for the sexually active (Lindquist 2002; cf. Ong 1990). Similarly, women in Yogyakarta out in public after evening prayers may be reprimanded by self-appointed morality squads who argue that a key reason they must monitor the behavior of women in *busana Muslim* stems from the fact that the dress style has become so fashionable that women adopt it without making the corresponding personal and religious transformations (Smith-Hefner forthcoming). The allure of the commodity, in this logic, tempts women to make primarily consumer rather than religious choices, suggesting that the two qualities must be mutually exclusive. To quote a recent article, "women who wear chadar get called fanatics, while women at the other end of the spectrum come in for criticism as hypocrites" (Champagne 2004: 20).

The various dimensions of *Islami* dress, the rewards and risks of adopting it, are apparent in the experience of Ibu Evi. Known as a woman of impeccable religious credentials in Yogyakarta, Ibu Evi is regarded as a public figure of both excellent taste and piety. During the late 1990s, after making the *haji*, Evi found herself increasingly pressured by men and women in her social class and religious circles to adopt *busana Muslim*. While she would occasionally do so for specific events, she generally ignored that pressure in favor of smart business dress. She insisted confidently to those who asked that she and God knew the state of her faith and that she did not feel it necessary to express that publicly. However, eight years later she now wears at least head covering and often full *busana Muslim* close to 30% of the time, she estimates. Several reasons have motivated this change. First, she acknowledges that more and more events that did not require Islamic dress in the past now do. Second, she finds the styles much more attractive and diverse than in the past and she no longer feels that dressing in a publicly Islamic way necessarily means dressing down or letting her beauty standards slip. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, she makes a point of appearing at events in unpredictable dress, sometimes in *busana Muslim* and other times not. Knowing that many people follow

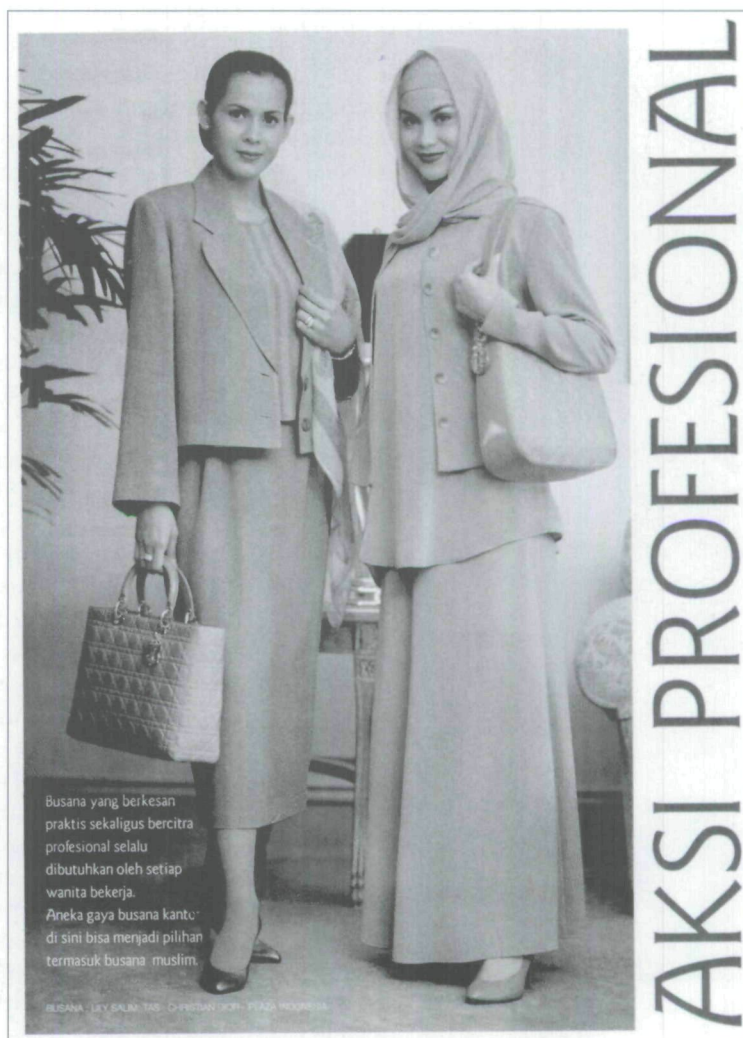
her dress and religious cues, she feels it is important for observers to recognize that she considers *busana Muslim* one of a variety of styles she inhabits, and that her piety is not directly linked to her dress. If *Islami* styles have become common, then she can wear *busana Muslim* intermittently, unlike in the past when the general sentiment was that the decision had to be total. That flexibility has been important for Evi, who enjoys playing with colors and styles in *busana Muslim*, but just as much enjoys having people know that she moves among dress types easily without diminishing her sense of devotion.

The increased visibility of *Islami* styles is also evident in the variety of urban, elite women's magazines such as *Femina*, the oldest and flagship journal of a now crowded market of nearly fifteen. *Femina*'s editors have consistently positioned their content and photo styles squarely in the voice of the intimate but superior older sister. Established in 1972 by a small group of prominent Jakarta business women and modeled on a variety of American women's magazines, *Femina* established a hallmark mix of articles on marital advice, career advice, and cooking, decorating, and fashion tips. Readers are informed of fashion trends, both national and international, through photography spreads that frequently feature Indonesian designers few readers can afford. Photo spreads positioned fashion as thrilling and consumption as pleasurable, through instructional categories of career dress, neo-traditional styles, and more playful and bare styles, each positioned as equal choices from which a savvy dresser might select.

In spite of this winning formula, by the mid-1990s editors told me they began to receive pleading and sometimes demanding letters from readers asking why Islamic fashions were not featured in these weekly spreads. Instead, Islamic fashions were only included in the magazine during the annual holiday periods of Idul Fitri and Ramadan and were often much more luxurious than would be appropriate for everyday wear. Indeed, such images frequently featured male models dressed in garb that clearly would only be worn for special religious occasions. Letter writers complained that the editors were forcing them to think up everyday fashionable Islamic looks on their own, without the trusted sisterly guidance they had come to rely on from the magazine. They argued that since they had taken up *busana Muslim* they could no longer see themselves reflected in the pages of the magazine and felt left out of the national fashion scene. Deploying the discursive authority of both consumption and of Islam, their requests for greater inclusion were voiced through the language of consumer choice. They framed their entitlement for equal coverage in the fashion press as a right due to them as consumers with the same funds and desire to spend in pursuit of identity as any other reader. As consumers who had made a personal and religious choice as individuals, they nonetheless took offense that this decision should be perceived as synonymous with taking no interest in looking attractive or being modern.

Editors explained to me that these letters forced them, in a sort of market-oriented, customer-knows-best way, into adjusting their content, moving ultimately to commission and run regular photo spreads that show women actively pursuing attractive, professional, and current lifestyles while dressed in *busana Muslim*. These run at least once a month and feature the work of a growing group of explicitly *Islami* designers, some of whose work is significantly more expensive than other local fashions featured in the magazine, but whose work is carefully presented as equal in style and sophistication to any other fashions in the magazine (see Figure 3). Yet some editors also confessed that these letters had slightly irritated them.<sup>9</sup> Considering that the editors fully considered

**Figure 3**  
 "Professional Action." An example of *Femina* magazine's approach to presenting Islamic dress as a variant of contemporary fashion equivalent to other styles. Photograph courtesy of *Femina* magazine.



themselves devout and faithful Muslims, having readers suggest that they were poor leaders and perhaps poor Muslims inverted the power relationship that the magazine had with its readers. Significantly, the way in which the editors could mitigate this accusation and reclaim the magazine's voice of authority was to turn *busana Muslim* into fashion, for that was the terrain of their expertise. Photo spreads that placed a woman in *busana Muslim* in the same frame as a woman in generic corporate dress suggested that either option was equally fashionable and that selecting between the two was primarily a consumer and aesthetic choice, rather than a political or religious practice. In a way, then, the commodification and fashioning of *busana Muslim* in the fashion press appeared to soften the more politically sharp critique that the editors perceived in these letters.

Two new magazines now dominate the Islamic women's market, *Noor* and *Ummi*. Patterned almost identically on magazines such as *Femina*, with advice columns, fashion spreads, recipes, and interior design, *Noor* magazine takes a sisterly tone in sharing with readers tips on how to dress piously and fashionably. An important emphasis is on translation, offering equivalent Islamic gestures or styles for everyday activities that a modern pious woman might require, yet assume that most readers nonetheless wish to be attractive and "chic."<sup>10</sup> Columns address how to handle greetings with men, how to deal with office politics, and frequent letters from readers who identify as having just begun to wear *busana Muslim*, seeking a way to convert their personal aesthetic into *Islami* style. Editors assume the one factor common to their readership is an explicitly Islamic identity, but generally assume that readers are active in the public sphere, either as professionals or as social volunteers. The expertise navigates local and global differences, positioning moral advice and Islamic fashion as global, rooted in the international makeup of the *ummah* and the universal truth of the Koran and Had'ith, while local ethnic traditions provide colorful accents and unique touches, adding authenticity and national pride. In all these magazines, *Femina*, *Ummi*, and *Noor*, Islamic fashions bear little trace of their elite social structure, suggesting that what would for many women involve a significant jump in socioeconomic position, i.e., the complete restructuring of a wardrobe and perhaps decreased work outside the home, is primarily a personal choice of religious devotion available to any woman who is so called.

A second example further elucidates this turn towards more visible public use of Islamic dress in contemporary Java. In the decade prior to the 1997–8 economic crisis a small industry of instructional femininity courses flourished in many Javanese cities, as well as on Sumatra and Bali. The course I studied was offered by a small private business college run by a modernist Islamic institute in a prestigious part of Yogyakarta. Like many such colleges, it offers short courses on business presentations, public relations techniques and public speaking, in addition to a course

called "Personal Development" (*Pengembangan Pribadi*). I use the term femininity course to describe these courses because, although it is not based on the Indonesian term for the course, it conveys the gender specific content of the course. Goals for most students included career and social advancement, which they couched in terms of desire for increased self-esteem, the sort of self-mastery and sense of identity that was appealing at a time of social flux (*percaya diri* or literally "belief in oneself"). Instructors in the course measured student self-esteem through vocal and carriage skills. Particular emphasis was placed on appropriating fashions and personal skills from expert sources (such as local and foreign magazines, television, and motivational philosophies such as Stephen Covey's) in ways consistent with what was considered Indonesian and feminine. The course I studied had been open for five years, although similar courses had been successfully operating in the capital city Jakarta since 1982. Instructors emphasized that students should attempt to minimize their provincial tastes through selecting styles of hair, dress, and comportment that were appropriate to their future employment and their roles as modern Indonesian women. By 2000-1, a significant point of tension between students and instructors centered on their often generational differences in interpreting Islam. Instructors in the course, who viewed themselves as faithful Muslims and in many cases understood their role in the course with an almost missionary style zeal, nonetheless increasingly found themselves faced with students who had chosen clothing styles associated with pious Islamic practice and who saw themselves as therefore more devout than instructors whose expertise they paid handsomely to acquire.

Many course participants, when asked by instructors about their decision to wear *busana Muslim*, said they did so out of a desire to critique corrupt representations of femininity and because the Koran states a woman must cover in public. To these students, Western-style dress was corrupt, not because it came from some place called the "West," but because it had become the style of an older generation of Indonesian women whom they felt had embraced a secular pursuit of personal enrichment, a generation that represented course instructors. Differing interpretations of Islam were therefore a source of polite negotiation between instructors and students in the course. The decision to wear a *jilbab* was neither discouraged nor encouraged by the instructors. Students frequently asked etiquette questions on how to handle interactions between the sexes outside the home. Such interactions were addressed in the basic course content, but did include Islamically specific variations for potentially awkward situations such as introductions or work-related dinner engagements between men and women. Instructors sometimes perceived students' questions around issues of Muslim clothing and manners as a subtle critique of an instructor's choice not to participate in such scrupulous self-monitoring. Like *Femina's* editors, these instructors were well-respected religiously devout leaders who



could become frustrated at subtle hints of their laxity. Students who chose to wear the *jilbab* were therefore carefully informed that their decisions would entail additional steps of self-maintenance, including extra salon trips and hair treatments to manage skin and hair subjected to the effects of heat and damp fabric on the skin. On occasion, one instructor would remind students that because *busana Muslim* eschewed body-conscious cuts, women might become lazy about maintaining an attractive figure and allow their loose clothing to hide an overweight body. Another instructor known as a respected *hajji* would warmly but pointedly joke with students that if the point of a *jilbab* was to cover the head, but not to diminish one's persona as a woman of good taste, then a wig should be an equivalent option. Yet the instructors and students still shared a commitment to personal self-transformation through self-discipline, a theme that generally overcame the particular details of how to achieve that transformation.

In the examples I have described, younger, more self-consciously styled women both critiqued their parents' generation for its participation in the New Order's morally bankrupt social and political project, yet they also asked of women of that generation that their own religious choices be acknowledged and addressed as more than a political act, but also as an attractive and expressive fashion choice. They demanded to be "seen" as fashionable, and they were at the vanguard of a now booming and ubiquitous Islamic fashion industry in Indonesia, from lipsticks to socks to gloves to brightly colored fabric tunics and scarves. Given the degree to which this industry has taken off since the end of the New Order, when Islamic identity has now become more available and less risky, as well as potentially more comforting given the social uncertainties surrounding a state of apparently unending crisis, it would be tempting to argue that these styles have been reduced, through their commodification, to merely that: style, bereft of any original political potency or personal piety. Such an assumption requires that we reduce the possibilities in piety or consumption to mutually exclusive and contradictory analytical categories. Yet the layers of complex readings and misreadings from the examples offered in this article suggest that *busana Muslim* cannot be reduced to a singular meaning, for wearers or observers. Perhaps most compelling, those who see the least contradiction are those who inhabit the position of pious consumers, women who write to magazines or take femininity courses as confident buyers of an attractive, stylish, pious look. While their letters, or their fashions, may be interpreted differently from what they intend, at least for a moment, they take inspiration and satisfaction from being simultaneously pious and fashionable.

In conclusion, I would argue that these ethnographic examples from contemporary Java show how the commodification of religious lifestyles can transform religious expression and can challenge our analyses of consumption. Rather than ask whether or not it is oxymoronic to be a

devout consumer, it is more interesting to ask how individuals are framed by and use the authority of consumer choice and religion to produce religious subjectivities that in turn generate their own discourses about agency. Each of the cases in this article reveals individuals working through the desire to be dependent upon God yet independent of, or at least in conversation with, other forms of social pressure. The magical gap at the heart of the commodity form allows them this space, and to some degree shapes its effects.

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### **Notes**

1. A by no means comprehensive selection of designers and brands focusing on this style includes Ari Hasni, Itang Yunasz, Auffa, ETTY, and Qotrun. Specialty department stores include Annisa, Shafira, and Karita.
2. For a discussion of the landscape of Islamic feminist organizations and struggles in the post-Soeharto era, see Brenner (2005), and Wieringa (2006).
3. Although the current prevalence of Islamic identity is both new in its breadth and particular in its relationship to recent political and economic transformations, Michael Laffan argues that the academic depiction of Indonesian nationalism as born of a secular, Dutch-educated native elite mistakenly understates the significance of Islamic nationalist tendencies in the Indies, political ties that were archipelagic and transnational (2003).

4. Several scholars have revisited Marx's concept of the commodity fetish, and the fetish more broadly, in the past decade. A brief selection includes Anagnost (1997, 2004), Graeber (2005), Hubbert (2006), Keane (1997, 2005), Maurer (2006), Pietz (1985), Spyer (1998), and Strassler (2000).
5. See William Mazzarella's engaging analysis of Indian advertising agencies on this point (2003).
6. Robert Hefner also argues that the tensions among diverse strains of Islam in Indonesia following the September 11 attacks of 2001 in the US have been under-represented outside of Indonesia in favor of homogenizing representations of Indonesian Islam as uniformly radical (2002).
7. For a discussion of this problem through the lenses of practice and performance theories, see Leshkovich and Jones (2003).
8. As Anna Gade has argued (2004), motherhood can be a highly motivating factor for women to pursue Koranic study and renewed Islamic piety, in part to set a good example to their children by demonstrating the fact that piety entails effort.
9. They also privately admitted that the increased visibility of Islamic fashion in the past five years has influenced mainstream Indonesian fashion, forcing it to become more modest and featuring more long-sleeved and covered styles.
10. Some of this translation is literal, providing theological readings from Arabic, as well as translating some of the magazine's content into English on its website ([www.noor.co.id](http://www.noor.co.id)), suggesting that the editorial board sees the magazine as potentially drawing a transnational Islamic audience. Articles and letters from the editors frequently use the English inflected argot of Jakarta, with words such as "aktif," "feminin," "simple," "oke," and "chic," all of which appear in the epigram to this article.

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